The Graphical Spot Report

A multi-echelon technique to quickly track and record battlefield information

by Captain Brandon K. Herl

Battle tracking is a fundamental skill every combat arms leader must have, from tank commander through brigade commander, but it is one of the most difficult skills to learn. Once upon a time, a combat leader had the luxury of having every piece of information critical for his unit's survival within eyeball range or earshot. Only high-level commanders received reports "transmitted" by messenger or other signals. But in modern warfare, the first-line leader is forced to gather a large portion of his combat intelligence from radio transmissions rather than first-hand observation. With the increase in battlefield complexity, the radio has become an additional sensory system that supplements the sights and sounds of battle. The leader must absorb both the multiple inputs he sees, hears, smells, as well as the constantly blaring radio traffic.

Battle Tracking and Spot Reports

One of the hardest parts of battle tracking is managing "spot" reports, the heart and soul of battlefield information. This information generates intelligence on enemy movements, strengths, dispositions, and probable courses of action. The information from one vehicle commander's spot report can make the difference in a brigade commander's decision to launch an assault or counterattack. Great leaps in battlefield technology still have not and will not replace this aspect of combat.

From the grimy, grease pencil smudges on a new platoon leader's map case to any echelon's tactical operational center, soldiers must track engagements and battles. At platoon level, battle tracking is usually something learned through trial and error. At the battalion and higher level, intricate battle tracking and spot report SOPs have evolved. Either way, the need for quick documentation, dissemination, and analysis of battlefield information exists. The graphical spot report is one way to help.

Graphical Spot Reports — The Overall Concept

All the graphical spot report does is provide an alternative method to track a battle on a map. It is not intended to replace the information flow pattern or SOPs. Graphical spot reports are designed to help the leader and battle staff speed up the process of tracking current information, reconciling and analyzing enemy movements, and "painting" a more complete tactical picture.

The basic information in a good spot report is in SALUTE or SALT format. The graphical spot report is no different. Figure 1 shows what a single graphical spot report looks like. Notice that all the information basics are depicted.

Upon hearing a spot report on a radio net, the leader quickly finds and draws cross hairs on the reported location on a separate overlay placed on top of the operational graphics (preferably in a fine-tip, *red* pen). In the upper right corner of the cross hairs, he gives a shorthand description of the size and equipment seen. Two tanks would become "2T;" three BMPs with four dismounts would be "3P, 4PAX."

The upper left corner will have the time the report was rendered. The lower left corner gives an indication of the unit's activities. If the unit is moving, an arrow is drawn indicating its direction. For example, if a report had the unit moving north, the arrow would be drawn pointing north. If the unit is stationary, a dot (or an "X") would replace the arrow.

The bottom right hand corner is not used and left for remarks. A battalion S2 could annotate "CRP" if he believed the report was an attacking combat reconnaissance

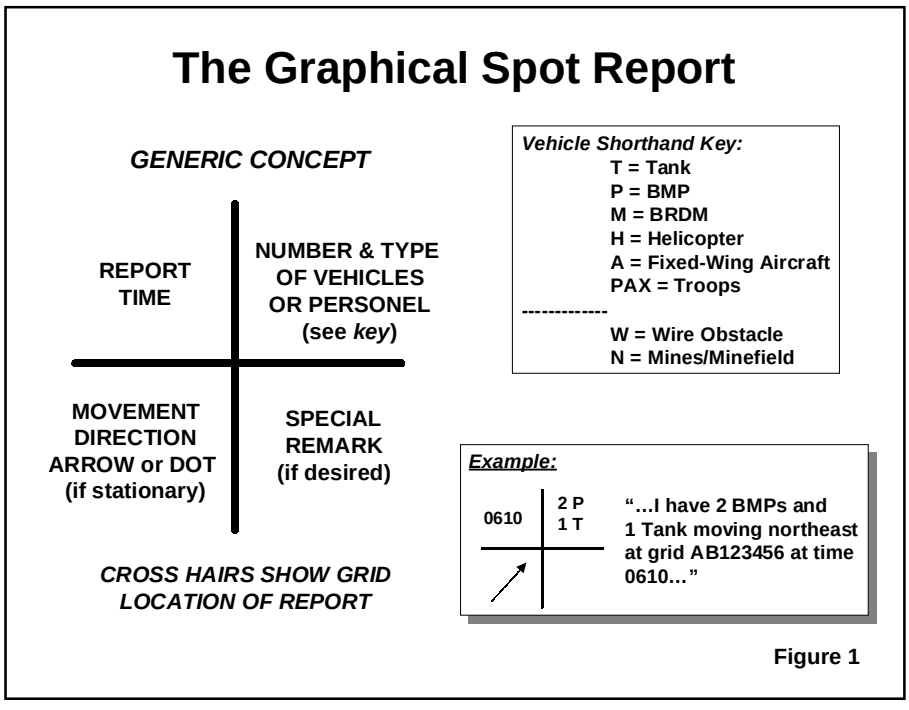

Figure 1

patrol. Likewise, a "PLT BP" could be used if a unit came in contact with three stationary, dug-in BMPs. Another possible use for this corner is to quickly track battlefield damage assessment (BDA).

Once the battle is finished, label the overlay with the usual marginal data and the date-time groups the overlay spans. This overlay can now be used as a record of contact for later reference. While not always helpful at company level or below, a staff may find this documentation useful in analyzing past enemy trends and predicting his next course of action.

Advantages

Graphical spot reports are designed to be posted *directly* to a map overlay once the report is received over the radio. This overlay becomes a hard-copy, graphic record of unit contacts. The benefit is that a commander (or his staff) can glance at the map and quickly reconcile redundant spot reports and enemy movements without sorting through hastily scribbled, map margin notes or heaping mounds of spot reports. This saves a lot of time and effort, especially in the middle of an action.

As more reports trickle in, a better picture of the enemy is painted. Over time, this overlay will illustrate certain enemy trends that some tracking systems tend to miss. Instead of giving an instantaneous enemy picture "snapshot," the leader now has a "moving picture" of the enemy.

By "connecting the dots" of similar spot reports, other information is gained. Enemy concentrations, main efforts, front-line traces, march rates, and axes of advance/battle positions become instantly readable. Likewise, blank spots on the overlay show a distinct absence of enemy activity — a result of either no enemy presence or enemy activity that is unseen (see Figure 2).

Drawbacks and Limitations

While this method is easy to learn and implement, it does have some drawbacks. The first is at the headquarters level. A TOC crew that is new at using this system will be tempted to quit "wasting" effort writing down reports and recording them in their logs. Graphical reports are not designed to replace this system; they are designed to complement it. The hard-copy reports are still needed later to reconstruct the battle and more accurately determine battle damage assessment.

Map skills and familiarity are paramount when using this system. A leader who fumbles around with locating grid coordinates on a map will not be able to keep pace with the incoming information flow. Likewise, unfamiliarity with the shorthand can also lead to confusion when repeating or disseminating a report.

A third drawback with this system is that analysis depends upon the user's familiarity with enemy tactics, techniques, and procedures. No good intelligence can come of looking at a bunch of cross hairs if you do not understand their significance or patterns.

Another caution is to be careful how much information is recorded. *Too much* information can negate its usefulness. This method is very useful for tracking friendly reports, such as the locations of minefields or booby traps, downed aircrews, fuel convoys, or LZ/PZ operations. Unskilled or unguided personnel will be tempted to put everything on the overlay, cluttering it beyond recognition.

Conclusion

Graphical spot reports are designed to supplement and enhance existing unit SOPs. This system gives leaders at all levels a simple method for acquiring (or refining) the necessary military skill of battle tracking. Additionally, it reinforces leaders to use and teach proper spot report submission techniques.

The graphical spot report battle tracking technique documents and follows the modern battlefield's swift information flow. It also quickly generates combat-critical intelligence on the enemy's maneuver scheme, a crucial element when considering preplanned countermoves. While the technique does have some major drawbacks, properly trained leaders or units can reap numerous advantages when fully employing this system.

Battle-Tracking Example

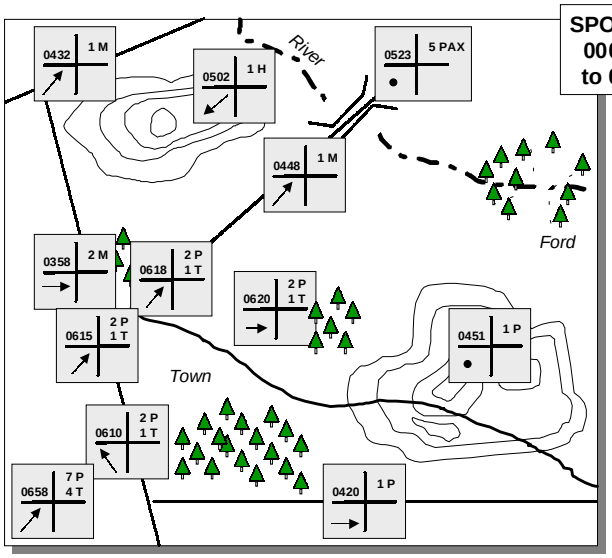

Figure 2

Captain Brandon K. Herl is a 1990 graduate of the U.S. Military Academy. He has served as a tank platoon leader, asst. squadron S1, troop XO, and asst. regimental S1 in 3d ACR, Ft. Bliss, Texas; squadron S1, asst. squadron S3, and HHT commander, 3-17 Cav, Ft. Drum, N.Y.; and Support Group J1, U.S. Support Group-Haiti, Port-au-Prince, Haiti. His military schooling includes Airborne School, Air Assault School, AOB, SPLC, JOMC, IOAC, CLC, CAS3, and the U.S. Marine Corps Amphibious Warfare School. Upon completion of his MS degree in forest science from Colorado State University, he will become an instructor in the Geography and Environmental Engineering Department at the U.S. Military Academy.